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ABSTRACT

The teacher can stimulate an appreciation of poetry in his students by selecting, reading aloud, and discussing only those poems to which he himself responds strongly. He can also develop students' enjoyment of poetry by encouraging them to bring in their own poetic discoveries and by alerting them to the many possible interpretations of a poem. Finally, by combining grammar and poetry, the teacher can give students new tools for the interpretation of poetry while instructing them in pronoun antecedents, inversions of sentence pattern, parallelism and subordination signals, punctuation, grammatical positions, and neologisms. (DD)

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NOTES ON TEACHING POETRY

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Most high school English teachers like poetry or they wouldn't be where they are. It is also true that most teachers, even math teachers, like poetry, if for no other reason than the fact that most people like poetry. Why, then, do so many high school graduates and some math teachers confess or advertise an aversion to it? The answer is probably as complex as income tax instructions, but part of the reason inevitably lies in the way it's taught. Something about the English classroom affects their response to what is labeled "poetry" even though they tap their feet to TV commercials, delight in the words to a novelty tune, appreciate *le mot juste* or rhetorical effects of a preacher or politician, and respond to "Invictus" from the lips of the commencement speaker. Students come to class with these primer lessons in poetry behind them, and if we fail to take them successfully through the next lessons, or worse, persuade them that they don't like what they do like, we've lost the right to the proud name of teacher.

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One major cause of this negative effect is the teacher's failure to communicate his own responses. This is not a plea for emotional readings, but rather a plea for a careful choice of poems. One might say, "Don't teach a poem you don't like," but that would not be proper, for occasionally mountains may be moved by the dis-

[24] Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 501.

covery that you don't have to like *all* poems. Cull out the ones which you don't care to read again, the ones to which you respond mildly or not at all, even if they are by Shakespeare or Whitman. Look for the ones which cause a tingle along the spine or scalp, or cause the facial muscles to twitch. If, following Brooks and Warren, you laugh at "Trees," or, having heard a tenor sing it effectively, you echo its sentimentality, you will probably be more successful with it in the classroom than the teacher who assigns it because it's in the next ten pages, or because it's famous.

A corollary to teaching only poems which involve you personally is reading new poems. There are two ways to do this, and both must be carried on at the same time: Many new poems must be read each year, and some of these must be read with depth and deliberation. Otherwise the teacher's involvement in the poem grows dim or burns out. Once a famous teacher, widely known for his inspirational readings of poetry, unknowingly demonstrated to a class that for him the fires in "Thanatopsis" were about out, yet he peckishly insulted the class for their passive reception of it. It was time for a new poem.

Inspirational readings or dramatic readings do not come easily for many teachers, but marked improvement in classroom performance is possible for a teacher who can and will use a tape recorded for rehearsal. "Kubla Khan" has melodies that sing to the kinesthetic ear; but it's still true that unheard melodies are sweeter, for the actual performance of "Kubla Khan" is quite likely to disappoint the performer, when, knowing inwardly how it should sound, he hears himself on tape. But that first shock at hearing what others hear soon passes, and by alternately recording and listening the teacher can soon approach in actual performance his mental ideal of how the poem should sound.

Even the teacher who cannot practice on a tape recorder should read a variety of poems aloud in class, but not without rehearsing them aloud at home. Since much poetry makes divinest sound, this device is less of a chore than most other class preparations.

Finding new poems to bring to class is no great difficulty. The *Saturday Review,* the *New Yorker, Atlantic,* and other periodicals which regularly print serious poetry should not be overlooked. New anthologies offer new selections. And don't overlook the paperbacked book shelves for items such as *One Hundred Modern Poems,*

edited by Selden Rodman in the Signet series. But the source that may outproduce all others is the class itself. Students should be encouraged to bring in poems they like, regardless of where they find them. Many will be imitation poetry, and more will be merely verse, but there is no better way to discover what will please the class. No one should be required to bring in a poem, for under that directive, students will understandably look for what they think will please the teacher. Some judiciously placed suggestions about where to look may help get the practice started, but soon they will be discovering gems in mines unknown to the teacher. Many of their discoveries will be synthetic, or seriously flawed, but poetic taste, like gemology, is to be expected of the specialist, but not of the beginner. The student who "discovers" *To the Virgins to Make Much of Time* may someday find more value in *To his Coy Mistress.* It is not necessary to insist that he qualify his present judgment of "sampler verse" if he can be kept reading. The teacher who has helped him see that many poets have said almost the same thing but said it differently has opened the door to noting the degrees and sources of difference.

Alerting the students to the possibility of other interpretations than the one which they first perceive upon reading a poem should be a prime concern. There are many ways to go about this, but one of the liveliest and most profitable is to play the devil's advocate and propose an interpretation which will seem acceptable on first inspection, but on closer reading is demonstrably wrong. For instance, Walter de la Mare's *Silver,* a brief poem based on the metaphorical silvering of the landscape under the moon, may be interpreted by the teacher as the description of a bas relief scene on a silver pitcher or urn in the same pattern as Keats' *Grecian Urn.* Soon an alert student may respond to such an analysis by noting that there is movement in the poem. This will not be sufficient evidence to deny the proposal the teacher has made, however, since the artist may have represented movement in the scene. Before long the observation will be made that the literal interpretation isn't as satisfying as the figurative one—if the urn really is silver, the poem has lost something the reader misses. The metaphor is lost, and the poem is dry.

In a similar situation, a teacher, confronted by the fact that many students read a moral into Housman's *Bredon Hill* so that the

poem points out that the lovers were punished for spending Sunday morning on the hill when they should have been in church, decided to fight fire with fire. He prepared an explication using all irrelevancies, and downright misinterpretations and asked a class Irrelevancies, and downright misinterpretations and asked a class just coming to the poem what they thought of it. It was a lively and alert group, and very soon they had detected the more obvious misstatements of facts about the poem. In fifteen minutes they had come to a decision held almost unanimously that the moralistic interpretation was wrong, but it took them a while longer to "prove it." The half-hour of class time was well worth it for the difference it made in the ways they approached new poems.

The teacher who can combine grammar with poetry runs the risk of killing the golden goose, but it can be done if it is handled always as a means of finding out more of what the poem says. Many a line of poetry depends on the antecedent of a pronoun for its meaning. The question should never be asked gratuitously, but when it is relevant, it should certainly not be avoided. The famous problem of the pronouns in Gray's *Elegy*, while more complicated than most, may, perhaps must, be brought into the discussion of that poem. To whom do *thee* and *thy* in lines 93 and 96 refer? The understanding of the following epitaph depends upon the answer.

Inversion of normal sentence pattern will cause trouble for the reader in such lines as Browning's "Irks care the crop-full bird? / Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?" Though the device of inversion for meter or economy is used less frequently by poets than amateurs, it may be discussed in class for the immediate value it will have in the reading of the lines involved, and for the longer range value it will have in increased understanding of sentence structure. Certainly the fact that the detail is a grammatical one need not be called to the attention of the class.

Parallelism and subordination are regularly marked in English sentences by strong grammatical signals which precede the sentence elements they control. Consequently, in poetry, major signals in meaning and logic and organization are vested in these same grammatical devices. The parallelism of Shakespeare's "That Time of Year" is signaled by the phrase "in me," first given in line 1, and repeated in lines 5 and 9. Each sets up a major image in the poem, and all three are collected by line 13, which begins, "This

thou perceivest." The subordinating signals in Shakespeare's "Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds" and "My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun" which occur in line 13 in each case, are similarly strong signals directly assisting the reader.

There cannot be intelligent reading of poetry which doesn't observe punctuation. Some punctuation is stylistic, but most punctuation operates as a set of structural signals indicating linkings, separations, or enclosures of sentence elements, and the operations of punctuation in poetry are identical to its operations in prose. To these operations must be added the manipulations of lines and spacing, which are frequently used as signals of separation. The poems of e. e. cummings supply many examples, as do those of Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickinson, and many others.

Cummings' "Anyone lived in a pretty how town" illustrates dramatically another opportunity to work with grammatical problems while studying poetry. At first this line seems baffling, as the entire poem may; it is, really, a simple love story with a side comment on conformity and individualism. Much of the difficulty is resolved when the reader realizes that *anyone* is the name of one of the two central characters (*noone* is the other), and a word we have grown to expect to be a pronoun is now a proper noun. Similarly, the structure of the phrase, *pretty how town,* indicates that *how* is neither adverb nor conjunction here, but must be read as an adjective or attributive noun. A *how town* is one which is more interested in how than why; thus this shift of grammatical categories, signaled by grammatical position, gives clue to the theme of the poem.

More familiar in the poems we read is the use of neologisms, coinages for the purpose of the poem. Sometimes these are created by compounding, as in Hopkins' "Pied Beauty," where *couple-colour, fresh-firecoal,* and *fathers-forth* are linked for the first, and perhaps the only time. Keats' *Hippocrene* and Poe's *Auber* and *Weir* are most likely inventions which satisfy the sound requirements of the poem, though considerable effort has been spent in searching for possible sources. Our purposes will be served if we note that we can see the grammatical functions of such words, and that the connotations of each are appropriate for the poems. Carroll's "Jabberwocky" is built of neologisms—except, and it is an important exception, for the words necessary for the grammar of the poem. Students

can identify the parts of speech of *brillig, slithy, toves, gyre, gimbel, wabe, mimsy, borogoves,* etc., with only a little prompting. A few minutes spent in noting how we can tell a noun from a verb in this poem may lead to new insights into sentences, though it will *not* help interpret the poem.

Too much can be made of grammar in this fashion, but a modicum served when the class is receptive, and especially when it will help with the poem, is not out of place. The ends of both poetry and grammar may be served, for they are not oil and water, and should not remain entities in the classroom.

Nothing has yet been said about figures of speech, symbols, allusions, puns, meter, or rime, and their absence here is not to be taken as an indication of their importance. These matters are discussed frequently, and materials on them are widely available, and it is assumed that their place in the classroom is established. These notes on the teaching of poetry are concerned instead with a few of the pedagogical practices not so frequently discussed, but no less important. Reading poetry is fun, and everything we do in the class should reflect that feeling about poetry. As one student said, who had just professed a new love for poetry (it was really just a reawakening), "It's not that it isn't hard—it's that it's fun."